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*National and Regional Internet
Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)*



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National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

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A special edition of GISWatch, "Internet governance from the edges: NRIs in their own words", is being published as a companion edition to the 2017 GISWatch annual report. It looks at the history, challenges and achievements of NRIs, as recounted by their organisers. It is available at <https://www.giswatch.org>



YODET

Walid Al-Saqaf

<https://yodet.org>

Introduction

Yemen's ongoing war has resulted in over 10,000 fatalities and close to a million people fleeing their homes.¹ It has also resulted in about 17 million citizens (65% of the population) suffering from hunger and has deprived around 16 million of access to water or sanitation,² with the United Nations (UN) saying that Yemen has suffered the "world's worst cholera outbreak."³ With all this going on, it may initially appear that the subject of internet governance would be the least of Yemen's concerns, especially if we consider that its internet penetration rate does not exceed 25%.⁴

Yet this report argues that overlooking the internet's role in such critical times is a mistake. The rationale behind this argument stems from the fact that the internet enables citizens to communicate freely, and this freedom would be particularly vital when citizens are in distress. In some ways, the internet is what is keeping the country from plummeting into an information black hole that would isolate it from the rest of the world, and could result in unspeakable atrocities and untold miseries.

"Because truth is often the first casualty of war, getting the truth out to the world and pointing to the atrocities committed against civilians are crucial to holding all sides accountable and pushing for a peaceful resolution," said Fahmi Albaheth,⁵ who chairs the Internet Society Yemen Chapter (ISOC-YE),⁶ a national civil society organisation

known for its active internet-related work during the war.

It is therefore worth asking how the war affects internet governance debates and what could be done to overcome existing obstacles and challenges. This report, which is based on a series of interviews with stakeholders in the internet governance space in Yemen, aims at answering these questions and proposes a set of actions.

Policy and political background

Yemen's war started in 2015 when Shiite Iran-backed Houthi rebels supported by the former regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh seized control of the capital Sana'a and vast parts of the country from the new president at the time, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who had to flee to Saudi Arabia.

In response to this coup, a regional coalition led by Saudi Arabia started a military counter-offensive on the Houthi-Saleh forces to reinstate Hadi's regime. As of August 2017, pro-Hadi forces have succeeded in recapturing the second-largest city, Aden, and the majority of the southern and eastern parts of the country, while the capital and the second-largest coastal city, Hodeidah, along with most of the northern governorates, remain under the control of the Houthi-Saleh coalition.⁷ In other words, the country is now split into two parts, each ruled by a different regime.

Hadi's regime attempted to move most of the governmental entities from Sana'a to Aden, including the Central Bank of Yemen, which made international monetary transactions easier in the south compared to the north.⁸

Since the country's telecommunication sector is centrally managed in the capital Sana'a, all internet service providers (ISPs) remained under the control of the *de facto* government instated by the Houthi-Saleh coalition, which has in turn imposed severe

1 United Nations. (2016, 28 October). Amid escalating conflict in Yemen, UN-associated migration agency launches 150 million regional appeal. *UN News Centre*. www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=55423

2 United Nations. (2017, 18 August). Yemen's 'man-made catastrophe' is ravaging country, senior UN officials tell Security Council. *UN News Centre*. www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=57380

3 Al-Jazeera. (2017, 25 June). UN: Yemen faces world's worst cholera outbreak. www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/yemen-faces-world-worst-cholera-outbreak-170625041932829.html

4 www.internetworldstats.com/me/ye.htm

5 Interview with Fahmi Albaheth, 8 August 2017.

6 <https://www.isoc.ye>

7 Al-Haj, A., & Michael, M. (2015, 25 March). Yemen's president flees Aden as rebels close in. *The Star*. <https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2015/03/25/yemen-president-hadi-flees-aden-palace-as-houthi-rebels-near-officials-say.html>

8 Ghobari, M., & Al Sayegh, H. (2016, 18 September). Yemen president names new central bank governor, moves HQ to Aden. *Reuters*. www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-cenbank-idUSKCN110oWB

restrictions, including censoring⁹ dozens of websites it deems to be pro-Hadi or belonging to the political opposition.¹⁰ According to Mishaal Thabet, who works for the country's exclusive provider of international telecommunications TeleYemen¹¹, the Aden-based Hadi government rarely coordinates with the Houthi-Saleh coalition in Sana'a, resulting in tremendous confusion, particularly when dealing with international partners.¹²

Challenges facing a national IGF in Yemen

Space for deliberation on internet governance issues in Yemen has mostly been limited due to the enormous challenges caused by the war. Faint voices calling for a national Internet Governance Forum (IGF) are being suppressed by the restrictions that the current circumstances produce. In order to understand how this came to be, it is important to review the relevant stakeholders and briefly describe how the situation in Yemen has developed over the last few years in relation to their roles and impact.

Since the *de facto* government of the Houthi-Saleh coalition took over the capital, they have also controlled the telecommunications sector, including all internet services. There were and still are fears that the Saudi-led coalition forces may attempt to target the Ministry of Telecommunications facilities or that the Sana'a government could shut down internet access to prevent pro-Hadi groups from using it.

Those fears were escalated when a brief shutdown occurred in April 2015, triggering a burst of discussion on social media regarding ways to create alternative means of accessing the internet in case of a total shutdown.¹³ A project created by the Yemeni Organization for Emergency and Exchange Technology (YODET)¹⁴ promoted satellite as one potential solution for activists and journalists to

remain connected to the internet.¹⁵ Meanwhile, internet speed and user experience nationwide continued to deteriorate due to damage to fibre-optic cables caused by the violent clashes. According to a source at the Ministry of Telecommunications, up to 30% of the international link's bandwidth capacity was reduced due to aerial bombardments on infrastructure facilities that were not maintained due to an embargo imposed by the Saudi-led coalition.¹⁶ The fact that the internet penetration rate continued to rise during the war, despite the difficult economic and humanitarian developments, shows how much of a necessity it has become to many citizens.

YODET's president, Adli Al-Kharasani, pointed out that the authorities in Sana'a had also started to systematically restrict access to internet services by limiting bandwidth and imposing higher tariffs. "We don't find any space for transparent internet policy discussions due to the ongoing war. Those in the government don't seem to give our view as civil society much weight," Al-Kharasani complained.¹⁷

An academic who has been actively involved in the regional internet governance space through the Internet Society¹⁸ and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN),¹⁹ Amal Ramzi, has expressed concern that there is lack of clarity about regulations and how they are applied in Yemen. The authorities may target internet end-users by suspending their services, invading their privacy and censoring online content.²⁰ The Houthi-Saleh regime has in fact suspended laws that protect citizens' rights, leading to arrests, prosecutions and even assaults on social media activists, as was the case with Hisham Al-Omeisy, who was incarcerated in August 2017 without due process.²¹

Amidst those serious developments, the internet community has had no free or open space for stakeholders to discuss internet governance matters. Several civil society actors interviewed for this study stressed that the lack of such a space meant that plans to organise a national IGF had to be put

9 It is noteworthy that the authorities used Canadian software company Netsweeper for blocking websites. See Dalek, J., et al. (2015). *Information Controls during Military Operations: The case of Yemen during the 2015 political and armed conflict*. The Citizen Lab. <https://citizenlab.ca/2015/10/information-controls-military-operations-yemen>

10 Ghattas, A. (2015, 15 April). News and Search Websites Blocked in Yemen as Conflict Escalates. *Global Voices*. <https://globalvoices.org/2015/03/30/news-and-search-websites-blocked-in-yemen-as-conflict-escalates>

11 www.teleyemen.com.ye

12 Interview with Mishaal Thabet, 21 August 2017.

13 Peterson, A. (2015, 2 April). Another casualty in Yemen: Internet stability. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2015/04/02/another-casualty-in-yemen-internet-stability>

14 <https://yodet.org>

15 Al-Saqaf, W. (2016). How the internet is giving Yemen a chance in its darkest hour. In A. Finlay (Ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2016: Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet*. Johannesburg: APC and IDRC. www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/economic-social-and-cultural-rights-escrs/yemen

16 Ibb News. (2017, 2 April). Ministry of Telecommunications indicates reasons behind slow speed and when it will be resolved. www.ibt-news.com/?p=22671

17 Interview with Adli Al-Kharasani, 5 August 2017.

18 <https://www.internetsociety.org>

19 <https://www.icann.org>

20 Interview with Amal Ramzi, 15 August 2017.

21 Human Rights Watch. (2017, 18 August). Yemen: Houthis Detain Prominent Activist. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/18/yemen-houthis-detain-prominent-activist>

on hold, since this would require creating a multi-stakeholder advisory group as per UN criteria,²² and the restrictions imposed by the government made forming such a group extremely difficult.

The *de facto* government in Sana'a has maintained an approach that prevents stakeholders from having a say on internet issues. There were decisions taken to limit bandwidth capacity and raise tariffs, for example, without consulting any of the relevant stakeholders, which caused an outcry within civil society and small businesses.²³ Internet café owners and activists said that such unilateral decisions may generate more revenue for the government but will be damaging in the long run, since they cripple innovation, entrepreneurship and economic development and limit freedom of expression.²⁴

Amr Mustafa, who manages some of YODET's activities with donors to strengthen weaker stakeholders in the internet governance space, agrees with this view, and points to the short-sightedness of the authorities when it comes to opportunities that the internet could bring.

Unlike many other countries around the world, the private sector in Yemen has limited influence in the internet governance space. The core businesses concerned about internet governance in Yemen are mobile operators, namely MTN-Yemen,²⁵ Sabafon²⁶ and Y Telecom,²⁷ who are in direct competition with the public mobile operator Yemen Mobile, which has a much stronger influence and subscription base. Although private mobile operators have a significant share of the market, they were unable – despite numerous attempts – to persuade the authorities to allow them to provide 3G or LTE services; their licences for these services have remained pending since 2015.²⁸ These private operators also compete indirectly with YemenNet,²⁹ Yemen's public ISP that is directly controlled by the Ministry of Telecommunications, which also controls TeleYemen,³⁰ the country's exclusive provider of international telecommunications, including internet connectivity.

This business-unfriendly environment has had a direct impact on users. “The internet is unfortunately mainly used for browsing websites, watching TV episodes, getting information and wasting time. It's not utilised for business development or other more productive purposes,” said Thabet, adding that the war's negative impact on the economy has resulted in stagnation in e-commerce projects and initiatives that had emerged in earlier years.³¹

Civil society, on the other hand, is much more influential than the private sector in internet governance discussions. It all started in 2013 when a serious dialogue around information technology and internet governance was triggered by ISOC-YE, which invited representatives of two globally recognised organisations, namely ICANN and the regional internet registry RIPE NCC,³² to meet local stakeholders from the government, private sector, technical community and civil society. The purpose was to debate the present and future of the internet in Yemen.³³

Abduljalil Alkubati, who used to head the internet division of YemenNet, said that at the time there was some strong collaboration between the government, represented by YemenNet and the Ministry of Telecommunications, and civil society, represented by ISOC-YE.³⁴ At the end of the ICANN/RIPE NCC visit, one of the recommendations called for organising Yemen's first national IGF, which could function as an arena where stakeholders could discuss ways to enable internet access and use more widely across the country.

“We started contacting our counterparts in Tunisia to learn from their experience in organising the Tunisian IGF and we were all excited and enthusiastic about the prospects of holding the first ever national IGF in Yemen. But all those dreams were dashed when the war erupted,” Alkubati said. He added that civil society as a stakeholder group has been pushing to hold a national IGF, since it is seen as the right arena to discuss how the internet could promote economic development, democratisation, and empowering the youth, who constitute the majority of the Yemeni population.

There was consensus among those interviewed for this report that the only three stakeholder groups that appear to be engaged in the internet governance space in Yemen are the government, business

22 IGF, Frequently Asked Questions about the NRIs. <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/frequently-asked-questions-about-the-nris>

23 Almasdar Online. (2016, 1 December). Houthi and Saleh's Party Disable “Golden Line” Package from Yemeni Internet Users. www.almasdaronline.com/article/86825

24 Kamil, K. (2016, 5 December). Wide discontent caused by abolition by government of Golden services for local subscribers. almawqea.net/news/14284

25 www.mtn.com.ye

26 www.sabafon.com

27 www.y-gsm.com

28 Interview with Amir Mustafa, 11 August 2017.

29 www.yemen.net.ye

30 www.teleyemen.com.ye

31 Interview with Mishaal Thabet, 21 August 2017.

32 <https://ripe.net>

33 Batayneh, F. (2014, 10 September). Outreach Visit to Sana'a, Yemen. *ICANN*. <https://www.icann.org/news/blog/outreach-visit-to-sana-a-yemen>

34 Interview with Abduljalil Alkubati, 21 August 2017.

and civil society, while the weakest stakeholders are the technical and academic communities, which are considered absent. For example, Amal Ramzi, who happens to be among the most active Yemeni female academics on internet governance issues, engages in her capacity as a member of civil society. According to Ramzi, the two main reasons for the absence of academia and the technical community were the lack of awareness of the role they could play in internet governance, and the fear of losing their positions at their institutes and universities if they bring up the notion of “governance”, which is often perceived as a taboo topic.³⁵

A similar attitude is evident regarding IGF principles such as transparency, multistakeholderism, inclusiveness and bottom-up processes as an approach to debating internet governance issues. The authorities in charge of the telecommunications sector in Sana’a appear to reject these notions, and consider anything to do with internet “governance” a threat. According to Thabet, “If you use the word ‘governance’, you may be accused of being a traitor or someone who wishes to create instability or weaken revenues from the telecommunication sector.”³⁶

Regional reflection

For some, the problem in Yemen is neither war-related, nor is it unique to the country. Some of the interviewees approached for this report see it rather as a regional problem, since most of the countries in the Arab world suffer from a similar imbalance in the representation and impact of stakeholders on internet governance discussions. A glaring example is the Arab IGF, whose 2015 version in Beirut was criticised for not having sufficient civil society representation when it came to issues addressed in the main sessions, which were dominated by government and business representatives.³⁷

According to Adli Al-Kharasani, who attended his first Arab IGF in Beirut in 2014, there was a disproportionately larger number of delegates from the government compared to civil society. Furthermore, he said that despite the representation in main session discussions, the business and academic communities were mostly absent. As a civil society participant, Adli viewed the event as an opportunity to learn and engage with others from the region in areas that Yemen’s civil society cares

about the most. These areas of interest range from infrastructure development, liberating the marketplace, encouraging start-ups and ending state monopoly, to increasing competition, improving services, and lowering costs for consumers. Additional areas of interest were migrating to IPv6, promoting openness and freedom of expression by ending censorship, promoting the rights of internet access for the youth and women, raising awareness about the benefits of the internet, and localisation by increasing access to local content.

Most interviewees hoped that the Arab IGF would continue and that many more national IGFs would be initiated in the region. They also stressed the importance of Yemen’s participation in as many of those events as possible, despite the ongoing conflict, since IGFs are valuable arenas to share experiences and plan ahead. It was noted that providing fellowships and other means of travel support to participants from Yemen would be needed due to the financial difficulties the country is going through.

Conclusion and action steps

The key conclusion we have reached through our interviews is that having a free space to discuss internet governance issues, such as a national IGF, should be a priority for Yemen because of the ongoing war. The internet is a key resource in Yemen that needs to be protected. At the very least, it is invaluable in its ability to bridge the information divide, and to raise global attention to the crisis in Yemen – a country which receives comparably less international media coverage, and less financial and humanitarian aid, than other countries in the region.

The best approach to assess the most effective ways that the internet can be used during such difficult times is for all stakeholders to participate in a national IGF to present their viewpoints on par with the government and work together to identify ways to move forward.

If the status quo continues, however, it is unlikely that the national IGF could take place any time soon, leaving the internet subject to abuse by the fighting parties, which would ultimately be the only stakeholders involved in the internet governance space.

To prevent this from happening, the following steps could be taken:

- Develop a template or best practice guide to aid relevant stakeholders in a country going through war or a state of emergency to organise its IGF with minimal risk.

³⁵ Interview with Amal Ramzi, 15 August 2017.

³⁶ Interview with Mishaal Thabet, 21 August 2017.

³⁷ Nachawati Rego, L. (2015, 22 December). The best and worst of the Arab IGF 2015. *Association for Progressive Communications*. <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/best-and-worst-arab-igf-2015>

- Support campaigns that raise awareness about the benefits of holding a national IGF, taking into account the tangible results from other IGFs in the region and internationally.
- Support participants from Yemen to engage more actively in regional and international IGFs, either in person or remotely, by providing incentives and fellowships if needed.
- Support projects on the ground in Yemen that aim at keeping the country connected to the internet. Those projects can be supported financially or logistically, for example, by providing satellite channels at reduced prices, or ensuring alternative means of communication via radio frequencies or dial-up in case of an internet shutdown.
- Empower actors who wish to improve regional IGFs such as the Arab IGF in becoming more inclusive and bottom-up, and avoiding the pitfalls of the past. At the same time, boost collaboration between IGF initiatives in the region to build on previous successes and learn from mistakes.
- Encourage technical and academic community members to participate more actively in IGF discussions, either by inviting them to events or getting them to collaborate with civil society on internet governance issues.

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs) are now widely recognised as a vital element of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) process. In fact, they are seen to be the key to the sustainability and ongoing evolution of collaborative, inclusive and multistakeholder approaches to internet policy development and implementation.

A total of 54 reports on NRIs are gathered in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch). These include 40 country reports from contexts as diverse as the United States, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Colombia.

The country reports are rich in approach and style and highlight several challenges faced by activists organising and participating in national IGFs, including broadening stakeholder participation, capacity building, the unsettled role of governments, and impact.

Seven regional reports analyse the impact of regional IGFs, their evolution and challenges, and the risks they still need to take to shift governance to the next level, while seven thematic reports offer critical perspectives on NRIs as well as mapping initiatives globally.

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